

THE CLEVELAND
MUSEUM OF ART
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THE LANGUAGE OF ETCHING: 1510-1665
September 22, 1992 - January 17, 1993

The Language of Etching: 1510-1665, on view from September 22 through January 17 at The Cleveland Museum of Art, examines the art of etching and demonstrates how European artists experimented with and refined this medium during the first 150 years following its inception in the early 16th century. The exhibition, in the Museum's Prints and Drawings galleries, presents over 90 of the finest etchings in the Museum's collection--works by German, French, Italian, Flemish, and Dutch masters--and features 18 prints by Rembrandt, considered the greatest practitioner of the medium. The exhibition also includes an explanation of the etching process and examples of etching tools.

Etchings, like engravings, are printed from metal plates that have been incised with grooved lines that will hold ink. In the engraving process, the lines of an artist's design are painstakingly cut into the metal with a sharp tool or burin, a laborious task which in the 16th century was usually performed by professional craftsmen. Etching, by comparison, is almost as free and effortless as drawing and requires little special training. The artist uses an etching needle to scratch or draw a design onto a metal plate that has been coated with an acid-resistant ground. When the plate is immersed in a bath of acid, the acid bites or eats away the parts of the plate that have been exposed by the needle. The ground is then removed and the plate is inked for printing. Artists of the 16th and 17th centuries prized etching for its accessibility and versatility, and its capacity to preserve the character of the artist's drawing style, which was difficult to reproduce in an engraving.

Acid had been used to incise decorative lines into arms and armor during the 1400s, and in about 1510 this technique was adopted by craftsmen for the production of prints. Daniel Hopfer, a German armorer, is believed to have made the first etched prints from iron plates. Albrecht Dürer also experimented with the new process but made only six etchings, all printed from iron plates, of which several are on view. The Dutch artist Lucas van Leyden's *Portrait of Emperor Maximilian I*, of 1520, also exhibited, is the first etching on copper, which became the preferred metal for printmaking.

Etching was especially suited to depicting landscape, which in the 16th century had become a subject of interest for its own sake as well as a setting for historical and religious subjects. Landscape etchings by the German artists Albrecht Altdorfer and Augustin Hirschvogel, which resemble spontaneous pen sketches, are among the first pure landscapes. In the 17th century, Dutch artists raised the art of landscape etching to a high level, uniting a realistic depiction of nature with a sensitive rendering of space, light, and atmosphere. By the middle of the 17th century, a new type of landscape had appeared, the idealized sun-drenched Italian countryside immortalized in the etchings of the French artist Claude Lorrain.

Although engraving remained the dominant print medium in Italy during the 16th century, a number of artists experimented with etching. While some did not develop a style of etching much different from their drawing, others, notably Parmigianino and Federico Barocci, took the medium much further, producing distinctive etchings of extraordinary beauty which became models for later printmakers. By the 17th century both Italian and Northern European printmakers had begun to realize the full potential of etching. Moving from a linear to a more painterly approach, they experimented with a variety of devices to give their etchings the rich textural and tonal effects of painting.

It was Rembrandt and his contemporaries who fully explored the possibilities of etching. Technically innovative, Rembrandt also infused his work with profound psychological and social content. This exhibition features some of his greatest etchings, including a self-portrait, done in 1639 at the height of his career; *The Three Trees* of 1643, one of his most atmospheric landscapes; and *Christ Preaching*, about 1652, which reveals his sensitivity to human behavior and expression.

The Language of Etching was organized by Sabine Kretzschmar, curatorial assistant in the Department of Prints and Drawings. Gallery talks in the exhibition are scheduled on Wednesday, October 28, and Sunday, November 1.

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